

Humanities and the National Park System



The National Park Service, like most federal agencies, is re-organizing, re-engineering, and generally re-assessing its ability to serve the public and preserve park resources. The Vail Agenda* provides our conceptual framework and a Strategic Plan charts our course. Following this lead, the National Park System Advisory Board prepared and approved "Humanities and the National Parks: Adapting to Change," a plan to enhance the interpretation of the historic resources of the national parks and historic sites and to improve the public education they provide. The plan was prepared in March 1994 by a special committee of the Advisory Board, consisting of historical and archeological scholars inside and outside the Park Service. It offers specific recommendations for strengthening the environment for education within the Park Service. As the Vail Agenda suggests, "the national park system has the potential to bring together the landscapes, places, people, and events that contribute in unique ways to the shared national experience and values of an otherwise diverse people." The NPS can serve the nation by helping to encourage a national community, revealing and exploring the diverse cultures which give us both individual and shared identity.

This responsibility goes beyond mere recitation of events that took place at a particular site, however. The Service has an obligation to teach

the meaning of these events as well as the contextual issues and values which have shaped the nation's course. The Humanities Report seeks to "raise the quality of research and scholarship in the parks, encourage the professional development of Park Service personnel, and reach a national audience more effectively." These objectives are imperative when one considers the important role the Service will have in the education of our nation's public during the 21st century as more people than ever will learn their nation's history outside of traditional classroom settings.

Considering the size and scope of this audience, the "new social history" is clearly in keeping with the educational opportunities the National Park Service has to offer. This "new" scholarship (which is now several decades old) has given increased attention to the diversity of ordinary people, their experiences and contributions to our national story, and has greatly influenced historical writing and interpretation in the last 30 years. Many parks already integrate the "new social history" into their historical interpretation. "Black Voices at Harpers Ferry" and "Lowell: Visions of Industrial America" are just two examples of exciting recent exhibits which bring to life the complexities of everyday experiences for previously voiceless populations. The recent publication of *African American Historic Places* (1994), by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, identifies the potential resources many park sites hold for not only providing a critical context for the study of America's diverse population, but also for contributing to the multifaceted character of our nation's history, which provides a more realistic look at all of America's past. The Humanities Report has designed objectives to build upon these existing efforts and to facilitate further integration of current scholarship into the Service's interpretive programs.

In order to fulfill its responsibility for education and research, it is also important that at all levels the Service increase its association with colleges, universities, museums, research libraries, and other educational and cultural institutions. Building cooperative programs for sharing person-

Pages 6 and 7:
Executive Board,
Organization of
American Historians,
Pecos National
Historical Park, New
Mexico, October
1994.



nel, resources, and knowledge for mutual benefit will increase the opportunities for public education, enhance its quality, and broaden its scope.

Several projects are currently underway to further these specific goals, the most comprehensive of which is an official agreement signed in



October 1994, between the National Park Service and the Organization of American Historians to facilitate interaction between the two organizations for their mutual benefit. Proposed cooperative activities include the sharing of information, knowledge, and methodology in the fields of history, historic preservation, cultural resource management, and interpretation by means of seminars, workshops, site visits, lectures, and symposia. The agreement encourages cooperative efforts designed to evaluate, redesign, and develop educational and interpretive research, exhibits, films, publications, and other public media. The two organizations will share resources, facilities, information, and expertise to enhance the public's understanding of history and historic preservation. The agreement is already being acted upon in several parks, including Antietam National Battlefield in Maryland and General Grant National Memorial in New York, enhancing their historical interpretation programs.

Effectively educating our nation's vast and diverse public in the future will require the implementation of innovative techniques, ones which should take full advantage of new communication technologies. Through the production of video, film, and radio and television programs, the Service can begin to reach a wide audience, many of whom may have no other access to the national park system. One of the ways in which the NPS is encouraging this effort is through the establishment of a cooperative relationship with private corporations who can provide the technology for many educational innovations, such as interactive

television in the classroom. The Service is currently considering a project to link a social studies classroom in a Denver middle school with Harpers Ferry for an interactive seminar on John Brown's Raid to enhance the students' educational experience as well as provide access to Park Service resources that would otherwise be unavailable to these young students.

Implementing the diverse recommendations of Humanities and the National Parks will be an ongoing process. It is our goal to get the process underway so that basic mechanisms will exist for others to take the initiative in creating programs which will integrate recent scholarship into exhibits and research, promote interaction with other scholars in public and private institutions, and expand the technological abilities of the National Park Service to educate the American public. The Humanities Program office welcomes and encourages any suggestions or proposals you may have for the implementation of these goals. By addressing the challenge of the Humanities Report, together we can further the preservation of our national heritage and enrich the educational experience that parks and historic preservation programs offer all Americans.

Note

* As part of its 75th anniversary celebration, the NPS undertook an intensive review of its responsibilities and prospects. The central focus of the review process was the 75th Anniversary Symposium, "Our National Parks: Challenges and Strategies for the 21st Century," held in Vail, CO, October 1991. The symposium's steering committee was charged with preparing a comprehensive report and set of recommendations for improving the stewardship and management of the national park system. *The National Parks for the 21st Century—The Vail Agenda* is the steering committee's report to the Director of the National Park Service.

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